

TRANSITION TO SCHOOL: Supporting children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability

While most children experience a positive transition to school, around one in five children in Victoria are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains when they start school (AEDC 2015). Children living in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas are more than twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable than those from the most advantaged areas, and this gap is widening over time (DET 2017).

It is important to recognise that a lot can be done to counteract this disadvantage and strengthen the transition to school for all children, regardless of where they live and their circumstances.

DEFINING VULNERABILITY

Children experience vulnerability or are at risk of experiencing vulnerability:

‘if the capacity of parents and family to effectively care, protect and provide for their long term development and wellbeing is limited’ (Victorian Government 2013).

¹ The categories of ‘children experiencing vulnerability’ and ‘children at risk of vulnerability’ are used interchangeably here to indicate that having a characteristic of risk does not necessarily lead to vulnerability. However, the specific circumstances in which children and families find themselves may leave children vulnerable to child abuse, neglect or family violence.

Stressors affecting a family or community may contribute to children being at risk of experiencing vulnerability, such as family stress, economic hardship, unemployment, homelessness, violence, alcohol and substance misuse, and mental health problems (Roberts, W 2015).

SUPPORTING THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES EXPERIENCING VULNERABILITY

Successful transitions occur when professionals build responsive and respectful relationships with children and families as well as with other professionals. Each family’s unique context shapes and influences these relationships. Some relationships will require more time and effort than others and this can especially be the case for children and families experiencing vulnerability or at risk of experiencing vulnerability.

Professionals work to develop reciprocal relationships, where they share their knowledge and expertise, whilst respecting and valuing families’ views. This mutual respect and trust characterises an authentic partnership with families.

This partnership allows families and professionals to work together to support continuous learning and development of children, as they transition between home, early childhood and school settings. Continuity enables children to form stronger attachments with familiar adults and learning environments. Through these secure relationships, children develop a sense of belonging, improve wellbeing and build resilience.

RAPID LITERATURE REVIEW

In September 2016, the Department of Education and Training commissioned the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and the Brotherhood of St Laurence to undertake a rapid literature review (Kochanoff, A., Krakouer, J., Mitchell, P. & Trevitt, J. 2016). The aim was to identify an evidence base for

The signs of child vulnerability may include poor attendance at kindergarten or school, developmental delay for younger children or presentation at hospital for suspected abuse. The evidence shows that where there are multiple factors present, the chance a child is vulnerable increases (Roberts, W 2015).

supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability in the transition to school.

The review focused on the transition support needs of the children most likely to be at risk of experiencing vulnerability, namely those who have experienced trauma, children living in out of home care (OOHC), refugee children, and children who experience intergenerational poverty.

The rapid literature review found that children at risk of vulnerability attend early childhood education and care (ECEC) and outside school hours care (OSHC) services at lower rates than their peers and have more complex support needs during the transition to school. Despite this, there is minimal literature regarding effective programs and strategies for supporting children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability during their transition to school.

The review highlighted four key issues and priorities:

- Building partnerships with families experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability.
- Taking a transdisciplinary and holistic approach to transition.
- Professional learning for ECEC, OSHC and school professionals.
- Further research to address gaps in the evidence base.

The rapid literature review report, presents a selection of effective programs, practices and strategies for supporting children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability during the transition to school. Many of these approaches are applicable for all children and families in their early years transitions.

PRACTICE REVIEW

Between October 2016 and February 2017, Deakin University conducted a practice review to highlight promising practices and strategies in Victoria for supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability in the transition to school (Nolan, A., Kilderry, A., Beahan, J., Lanting, C. & Speldewinder, C. 2017). The findings of the rapid literature review helped define the key features of evidence-based programs and approaches occurring in Victoria.

METHODOLOGY

The practice review used both quantitative and qualitative methods to reflect the voices of professionals, teachers, and families on practices within ECEC services, OSHC and schools that support transitions for children and families in vulnerable circumstances.

Data collection consisted of a state-wide survey, focus groups and phone interviews across metropolitan, regional and rural areas in Victoria. A total of 309 survey responses were received from ECEC, OSHC and school professionals. In addition, 126 ECEC and school professionals and 19 family members participated in focus groups or interviews.

PRACTICE REVIEW FINDINGS

Eighty-three percent of survey respondents reported that they changed their approach to supporting transitions with children and families experiencing vulnerability.

Both the rapid literature review and the practice review highlighted the critical importance of the following approaches:

- Services and organisations working collaboratively, knowing and valuing each other's remit, and sharing information to ensure families are adequately supported during transitions.
- Tailoring transition practices and approaches to the uniqueness and diversity of each family. Getting to know each family and their circumstances was considered important to making transition processes appropriate, accessible and responsive.
- Establishing partnerships with families that enable professionals to gather more information about each family and their situation as well as to make children and families feel valued informed and connected.
- Building professionals' knowledge, skills and attitudes to work respectfully and effectively with children and families experiencing vulnerability.

- Further research and evaluation of programs and practices to determine the effectiveness of transition to school for children and families experiencing vulnerability.

“It’s about the interaction that you have with the family and the child. My personal feeling is the kindergarten teachers I’ve seen who’ve had a big success rate with these families they’ve just made a big fuss ‘it’s so good to see you, I’m so glad you could come today, anything we can do to help you with attendance’. Give them a ring and see how things are going. ‘What can we do to help you out?’ So you put it back on them and ask how we can support [them] rather than being judgmental about them.” (Preschool Field Officer)

The practice review report highlights a range of promising or effective practices and case studies in Victoria that support the transition to school for children and families experiencing vulnerability. While focusing on children and families experiencing vulnerability, these strategies can equally be applied to strengthen the transition to school process for all children and families.

For a summary of the patterns and trends in evidence-based transition programs and links to some useful resources see **Appendix A**.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONSIDERATION

Victoria’s Early Childhood Reform Plan provides a long-term vision to transform Victoria’s early childhood services into a higher quality, more equitable and inclusive system (DET 2017). The rapid literature review and the practice review both outline strategies and promising practices that can contribute to this vision.

The practice review identified the following opportunities for consideration by ECEC and OSHC services and schools to strengthen transition to school for children and families in vulnerable circumstances:

- Formal networks are established, or existing networks built upon, that collaborate around

transition to school processes and practices for children and families experiencing vulnerability.

- Each network designates a ‘leader’ who can champion transition to school at network meetings.
- Evaluation processes are embedded in ECEC and OSHC services, schools and networks to identify evidence-based approaches to support the transition to school for children and families experiencing vulnerability.
- The revised Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) and Transition: A Positive Start to School Resource Kit is used more widely across sectors and Transition Learning and Development Statements are fully utilised by schools.
- There is a focus on building the capacity of staff working with children and families experiencing vulnerability, including attending evidence-based professional learning.
- Schools have a ‘key’ transition person/s to support each child and family experiencing vulnerability.
- Young children experiencing vulnerability are encouraged to participate in ECEC programs and services, for example in Early Start Kindergarten.
- ECEC and OSHC services, schools and networks understand the guidelines and protocols for sharing information to support children and families experiencing vulnerability transitioning across services and settings.

To find the full reports and other transition to school resources, including the Transition: A Positive Start to School Resource Kit and an extensive online appendix with links to further resources see:

www.education.vic.gov.au/transitiontoschool

REFERENCES

Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) 2015, *National report 2015: a snapshot of early childhood development in Australia*, Australian Department of Education and Training, retrieved 25 August 2016, www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2015-aedc-national-report

Department of Education and Training (DET) 2017, *Early Childhood Reform Plan*, Melbourne. www.education.vic.gov.au/about/educationstate/Pages/earlychildhood.aspx

Kochanoff, A., Krakouer, J., Mitchell, P. & Trevitt, J. 2016, *Early years transitions: Supporting children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability – Rapid literature review*, State of Victoria, Department of Education and Training, Melbourne. www.education.vic.gov.au/transitiontoschool

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Roberts, W. 2015, *Enabling change through education for children and their families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage*, *Every Child*, 21(3), p. 37.

Victorian Government 2013, *Victoria's Vulnerable Children Strategy 2013–2022*, www.Victorias-vulnerable-children-Our-Shared-Responsibility.pdf

APPENDIX A: SUMMARY OF TRENDS

Adapted from Appendix A in: Kochanoff, A., Krakouer, J., Mitchell, P. & Trevitt, J. 2016, *Early years transitions: Supporting children and families at risk of experiencing vulnerability – Rapid literature review*, State of Victoria, Department of Education and Training, Melbourne.

Patterns and trends in the evidence to support effective transition to school	Target groups	Levels	Programs (references found in rapid literature review)	Page number (rapid literature review)
Accessibility, transportation, time, availability, flexibility of work & caring duties	Children in out of home care	Communities	Access strategies (Robinson et al. 2012)	p.29
	Poverty	Families	Early Childhood Access and Participation project (Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST) 2016b)	p.22
	Refugees	Leaders	Fully integrated service delivery (Press et al. 2010)	p.30
				SchoolPLUS (Regnier 2012)
Agency for all: involvement in decision-making	Refugees	Communities	Care teams	p.29
		Educators	Early Childhood Access and Participation project (VFST 2016b)	p.22
		Families		
Cultural, linguistic and social sensitivity, communication, interpreting and translation	Poverty	Agencies	Schools and families in partnership: a desktop guide to engaging families from refugee backgrounds in their children's learning (VFST 2015)	p.23
	Refugees	Children	Early Childhood Access and Participation project (VFST 2016b)	p.22
		Communities	Fully integrated service delivery (Press et al. 2010)	p.30
		Educators	Pyramid Model for supporting preschool refugees (Hurley et al. 2013)	p.23
		Families	VEYLDF Equity and diversity practice guide, see:	
		Leaders	VEYLDF resources for professionals	
		Professionals		
Data collection: identification, instruments, census, readiness measures	Children in out of home care	Agencies	Foundation House Schools Support (Cross et al. 2011)	p.23
	Poverty	Educators	Thrive in 5 (2016)	p.32
	Refugees	Leaders		
		Professionals		
	Trauma-affected			

Patterns and trends in the evidence to support effective transition to school	Target groups	Levels	Programs (references found in rapid literature review)	Page number (rapid literature review)
Leadership: ensuring appropriate planning, prioritising, policies	Children in out of home care Poverty Refugees Trauma-affected	Agencies Communities Educators Leaders	Access strategies (Robinson et al. 2012) Early Childhood Access and Participation project (VFST 2016b) Fully integrated service delivery (Press et al. 2010) KidsMatter Early Childhood (KMEC) (Slee et al. 2012b) SchoolPLUS (Regnier 2012)	p.29 p.22 p.30 p.20 p.31
Long-term planning: sustained programs over years not months, personalised, intense, long-term therapy	Trauma-affected, Refugees Children in out of home care	Children Families Residential services	Care teams Fully integrated service delivery (Press et al. 2010) Home Instruction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) (Dean & Leung 2010) Pyramid Model (Hurley et al. 2013) SchoolPLUS (Regnier 2012)	p.29 p.30 p.25 p.23 p.31
Monitoring progress beyond transition: follow up programs	Children in out of home care Poverty Refugees Trauma-affected	Agencies Children Communities Educators Families Leaders	Fully integrated service delivery (Press et al. 2010) Kids in Transition to School Program (Pears et al. 2013) SchoolPLUS (Regnier 2012)	p.30 p.19 p.31
Parenting education and support for families and carers: supported playgroups	Poverty Trauma-affected	Agencies Communities Families	Fully integrated service delivery (Press et al. 2010) HIPPY (Dean & Leung 2010; Yak 2016) Kids in Transition to School Program (Pears et al. 2013) Partnerships in early childhood program (PIEC) (Thomson et al. 2007) Ready Together (Binstadt 2010) SchoolPLUS (Regnier 2012)	p.30 p.25 p.19 p.31 p.32 p.31

Patterns and trends in the evidence to support effective transition to school	Target groups	Levels	Programs (references found in rapid literature review)	Page number (rapid literature review)
Partnerships between families, ECEC, OSHC, schools, children and communities	Children in out of home care Poverty Refugees Trauma-affected	Communities Educators Families	'Promising practices' for working with students and families living in poverty (Cuthrell et al. 2010) Early Childhood Access and Participation project (VFST 2016b) Fully integrated service delivery (Press et al. 2010) Kids in Transition to School Program (Pears et al. 2013) Partnerships in Early Childhood program (Thomson et al. 2007) Pyramid Model (Hurley et al. 2013) SchoolPLUS (Regnier 2012) VEYLDF Partnerships with families practice guide and VEYLDF Partnerships with professionals practice guide see: VEYLDF resources for professionals	p.24 p.22 p.30 p.19 p.31 p.23 p.31
Professional learning: for ECEC professionals and Initial Teacher Education, training, consultation, resources, guided reading	Children in out of home care Poverty Refugees Trauma-affected	Educators Leaders	'Promising practices' for working with students and families living in poverty (Cuthrell et al. 2010) Early Years Education Program (Fordham 2016) Kids in Transition to School Program (Pears et al. 2013) – 40 hours KMEC (Slee et al. 2012b) Social Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum (Jones & Bouffard 2012) Partnerships in Early Childhood program (Thomson et al. 2007) Pyramid Model(Hurley et al. 2013) Ready Together (Binstadt 2010) Supportive Trauma Interventions for Educators (STRIVE) pilot (McConnico et al. 2016) Foundation House Schools Support (Cross et al. 2011)	p.24 p.26 p.19 p.20 p.36 p.31 p.23 p.32 p.15 p.23

Patterns and trends in the evidence to support effective transition to school	Target groups	Levels	Programs (references found in rapid literature review)	Page number (rapid literature review)
Reflective practice: personal, communities of practice, coaching, mentoring	Children in out of home care Poverty Refugees Trauma-affected	Communities Educators Leaders	Best Start (DET 2016a) Early Childhood Access and Participation project (VFST 2016b) Early Childhood Effective Mentoring Program (Flack et al. 2016) STRIVE pilot (McConnico et al. 2016) Foundation House Schools Support (Cross et al. 2011) VEYLDF Partnerships with families practice guide, see: VEYLDF resources for professionals	p.36 p.22 p.37 p.15 p.23
Self-regulation: programs and strategies focussed on resilience and prosocial behaviour	Children in out of home care Trauma-affected	Children Families	Interventions for refugee children (Betancourt et al. 2013) Dunedin study (Poulton et al. 2015) Kids in Transition to School Program (Pears et al. 2013) Partnerships in Early Childhood program (Thomson et al. 2007)	p.22 p.18 p.19 p.31
Social and emotional focus: development, attachment programs, teaching about emotions	Children in out of home care Poverty Refugees Trauma-affected	Children Professionals	Early Years Education Program (Fordham 2016) Fully integrated service delivery (Press et al. 2010) KMEC (Slee et al. 2012b)	p.26 p.30 p.20
Specialists working with ECEC and schools: mental health professionals in ECEC/schools	Children in out of home care Refugees Trauma-affected	Children Families Professionals	Interventions for refugee children (Betancourt et al. 2013) Early Years Education Program (Fordham 2016) Fully integrated service delivery (Press et al. 2010) Partnerships in Early Childhood program (Thomson et al. 2007) VEYLDF Partnerships with professionals practice guide see: VEYLDF resources for professionals	p.22 p.26 p.30 p.31

Patterns and trends in the evidence to support effective transition to school	Target groups	Levels	Programs (references found in rapid literature review)	Page number (rapid literature review)
Stability: predictability, continuity, routines, consistent carers and ECEC, school and OSHC staff, rules and low threat environment	Children in out of home care Trauma-affected Refugees	Agencies Children Educators Families	Care teams Promising practices for working with students and families living in poverty (Cuthrell et al. 2010) Early Years Education Program (Fordham 2016) Fully integrated service delivery (Press et al. 2010) Partnerships in Early Childhood program (Thomson et al. 2007) SchoolPLUS (Regnier 2012) STRIVE pilot (McConnico et al. 2016) Signs and symptoms of traumatic stress in children 0-6 years (Wright 2014)	p.29 p.24 p.26 p.30 p.31 p.31 p.15 p.13
Strength-based approaches	Refugees Trauma-affected	Communities Educators Families Professionals	Care teams Early Childhood Access and Participation project (VFST 2016b) Signs and symptoms of traumatic stress in children 0-6 years (Wright 2014) Strength-based approach guide, see: www.education.vic.gov.au/transitiontoschool VEYLDF High expectations for every child practice guide see: VEYLDF resources for professionals	p.29 p.22 p.13

Patterns and trends in the evidence to support effective transition to school	Target groups	Levels	Programs (references found in rapid literature review)	Page number (rapid literature review)
Support with transition: to ECEC and schools, administration, agencies, referral services	Children in out of home care	Communities	Transition: a positive start to school resource kit (DET 2017)	
	Poverty	Educators	www.education.vic.gov.au/transitiontoschool	
	Refugees	Families	Access strategies (Robinson et al. 2012)	p.29
	Trauma-affected		Schools and families in partnership: a desktop guide to engaging families from refugee backgrounds in their children's learning (VFST 2015)ECAP (VFST 2016b)	p.23
			Early Years Education Program (Fordham 2016)	p.26
			Fully integrated service delivery (Press et al. 2010)	p.30
			HIPPY (Dean & Leung 2010; Lidell 2011; Yak 2016)	p.25
		SchoolPLUS (Regnier 2012)	p.31	
Transdisciplinary teams	Children in out of home care	Agencies	Access strategies (Robinson et al. 2012)	p.29
		Parents	Best Start (DET 2016a)	p.36
	Poverty	Professionals	Early Childhood Access and Participation project (VFST 2016b)	p.22
	Refugees	Educators	Early Years Education Program (Fordham 2016)	p.26
	Trauma-affected		Early Years Education Program (Fordham 2016)	p.30
			Fully integrated service delivery (Press et al. 2010)	p.28
			Inquiry to implementation project (IIP) (Duhn et al. 2014)	p.27
			Pathways to Prevention (Freiberg et al. 2010)	p.31
			Partnerships in Early Childhood program (Thomson et al. 2007)	p.23
			Pyramid Model (Hurley et al. 2013)	p.31
			Ready Together (Binstadt, 2010)	p.32
			SchoolPLUS (Regnier 2012)	p.32
			Thrive in 5 (2016)	p.23
		Foundation House Schools Support (Cross et al. 2011)		
		VEYLDF Partnerships with professionals practice guide see: VEYLDF resources for professionals		

Patterns and trends in the evidence to support effective transition to school	Target groups	Levels	Programs (references found in rapid literature review)	Page number (rapid literature review)
Trauma-informed approaches that shape organisations to be more trauma-sensitive in their work with children	Children in out of home care Refugees Trauma-affected	Agencies Educators Leaders Professionals	9 trauma-informed principles (Tucci & Mitchell 2015) Foundation House Schools Support (Cross et al. 2011) STRIVE pilot (McConnico et al. 2016) Calmer Classrooms – A guide to working with traumatised children, Queensland Government, see: http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/healthy/pdfs/calmer-classrooms-guide.pdf	p.51 p.23 p.15
Trauma-informed treatments, interventions, healing activities e.g. sensory materials; noise cancelling headphones; blankets; kinetic sand; theraputty; emotion cards, bibliotherapy	Trauma-affected Children in out of home care Refugees	Children	STRIVE pilot (McConnico et al. 2016) Interventions for refugee children (Betancourt et al. 2013)	p.15 p.22